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SUBJECT: LATVIA SUPPORTS STATUS QUO ON BELARUS TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS,
BUT SEEKS TO EXPAND ECONOMIC TIES

REF: A. SECSTATE 112644

¶1. (SBU) Latvia supports the status quo of sanctions against Belarus and will back the EU position of a further one year suspension of travel restrictions at the next GAERC meeting on November 16. Nonetheless, Latvia is looking to build a stronger economic relationship with Belarus, as evidenced by FM Riekstins' visit to Minsk on November 4 and a Riga municipal government trade delegation last month.

Initial Readout of FM Trip to Minsk

¶2. (SBU) Foreign Minister Maris Riekstins' November 4 trip to Minsk was a success, according a preliminary readout from the Head of the East Europe and Central Asia Division of the Latvian MFA, Liga Andersone. The top two priorities were economic cooperation and travel restrictions. Andersone said Latvia expects to sign an agreement next month with Belarus on allowing limited cross-border travel within 50 kilometers of the border, effectively reinstating travel rights suspended upon Latvia's entry into the Schengen zone. Latvia has already held consultations on this issue with the EC and Andersone said improvement of people-to-people exchanges is important for economic development, especially in these difficult economic times.

¶3. (SBU) Belarus FM Martynov reportedly told Riekstins that Belarus is grateful for EU financial assistance, but lamented the slow pace of distribution. Martynov also noted that he is confident the EU will work to simplify its visa regime with Belarus to be more consistent with the EU visa policies for Ukraine, Russia, and Moldova. Andersone said that simplification of the visa regime would be positive despite the fact that Lukashenko's government would use the agreement for internal political benefit in advance of next year's elections. Finally, Lukashenko asked Latvia to empathize with its difficult decision not to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the pressure it is under from Russia to do so.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Latvian Undersecretary for Bilateral Affairs and Economic Relations, Maija Manika, told Post in a separate meeting with a visiting Treasury Department delegation that U.S. economic sanctions against Belarus are having a direct negative impact on the Latvian economy. Based on Manika's statements and Latvia's efforts to strengthen its economic ties as listed above, it appears that Latvia would welcome a softening of U.S. economic sanctions against Belarus.

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